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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION ACTIVISTS JAILED AHEAD OF EUROPEAN MARCH

Classified By Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Ref: Minsk 853

¶1. (U) Ahead of the democratic opposition's October 14 European March (reftel), GOB security services have detained several opposition leaders and activists. On October 8, Minsk police arrested march organizer Yevgeniy Afnagel soon after he met with authorities to discuss the European March and held him incommunicado until a closed court sentenced him to 10 days in jail for allegedly cursing in public. The following day, a Gomel court sentenced opposition United Civic Party (UCP) Regional Chair Vasil Palyakov and Deputy Vladimir Katsora to seven days in jail on the same charge. On October 5, BKGB officers had raided UCP's Gomel office and confiscated six computers and three copiers.

¶2. (C) At a press conference on October 10, UCP Chair Anatoliy Lebedko described the arrests as intended to disrupt march preparations and prevent the U.S. and EU Ambassadors from visiting with march coordinators during their planned visit to Gomel on October 12. Noting opposition youth leader Aleksandr Atroshchenkov's October 9 arrest and confiscation of Atroshchenkov's computer and materials promoting the march, opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) Chair Vintsuk Vyachorka asserted to Poloff that the GOB was strategically targeting activists in charge of coordinating transportation of march participants from the regions to Minsk. Although Vyachorka observed that the regime might prefer a few, well-targeted arrests to minimize damage to its EU relations, he would not rule out a larger wave of detentions.

Comment

¶3. (C) So far, pre-emptive arrests have not yet been on scale with those in the run up to the March 25 and July 27 demonstrations. The GOB likely senses greater international scrutiny because the march has sharply focused EU attention on Belarus' place in a wider European context. However, we would not be surprised if these arrests are merely the opening volley for more pre-emptive detentions on the eve of the march.

Stewart